

Cox, Jessica. *Neo-Victorianism and Sensation Fiction*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019 (251 pp). ISBN: 978-3-030-29289-8.

Were we to define the Victorians' appreciation of sensation fiction as briefly, yet at the same time as comprehensively as possible, a characterization that could possibly reflect the complex relationship between the genre and the historical period that gave birth to it would probably be "popular, yet contestable." Significantly, this idiosyncratic designation mirrors the imprint of sensation fiction on the literature and culture of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and reflects literary criticism's acknowledgement of the genre. It is the contemporary echoes and legacies of the Victorian genre which Jessica Cox's study seeks to decipher through her perceptive reading of the multiple ways in which sensation fiction's tropes and concerns survive in, and inform, a wide variety of neo-Victorian works. Acknowledging the fact that the numerous afterlives of the genre make it possible to speak of neo-sensationalism or neo-sensation novels, Cox sets out to explore sensation fiction's function as an adhesive for a constellation of subgenres and recurrent motifs that concern the neo-Victorian project. At the heart of this exploration lies the conviction that sensation fiction's conventions "offer useful metaphors for our engagement with the past" (4). In the first part of the book, these conventions are examined under a generic lens which approaches the contemporary return to the past through sensation fiction's interactions with and/or lasting impact on the Gothic, detective fiction, and Young Adult (YA) fiction. The second part focuses on concrete sensation tropes, namely the representation and articulation of trauma, engagements with archaeology and/or history, and questions of inheritance.

Contextualizing their discussion of neo-Victorian works within Victorian manifestations of the genre, all chapters succeed in offering valuable insights into the origins and forebears of neo-sensationalism. Reflexive of neo-Victorianism's hindsight, this

retrospection aptly illustrates the rationale behind neo-sensation fiction's choice of the tropes it borrows and reworks, and the ends these are ultimately made to serve. Thus, the Gothic trope of imprisonment, and the problems of articulating and fully representing (sexual) abuse and trauma attest to the restrictions faced by women in a patriarchal society, exposing the causes for the heroines' transgressions. The fact that both Victorian and neo-sensation fictions conclude with these heroines' demise and the restoration of order, that is, of "idealised femininity," or with the silencing and regression of their traumatic experiences, bridges past and present on account of their timeless testimony to women's disadvantageous position within society (68, 153). Victorian sensation fiction, Cox says, further offers a framework for exploring female transgression in YA neo-Victorian novels which document the maturation process of "feisty, subversive" heroines placed "at the nexus of connections between the Victorian age and the modern world" (104, 134). Faring better than their counterparts in Gothic and trauma narratives, YA heroines emerge as "*neo*-Victorian" characters, embodying "a contemporary creation posing as Victorian" (131). In this way, they draw attention to the fact that readers of neo-sensation, and, by extension, of neo-Victorian fiction in general, need to beware that "what appears to be a Victorian tale is, in fact, something else, something other—and potentially something very different from its literary ancestor" (132).

According to Cox, this veiled distance between past and present is echoed in neo-sensation works linked to detective fiction. These parallel the amateur detective's mystery-solving endeavours to neo-Victorianism's awareness that the attempt to "establish a clear vision of history" requires that the Victorian era be rationally approached and that evidence be gathered and interpreted (100). Yet, this is a self-contradictory struggle precisely because the processing of evidence is "subjective," and, hence, "liable to misinterpretation" (100). This is a possibility also lurking in works that centralize archaeological discoveries, where excavated—frequently incomplete—artifacts suggest that history, the Victorian past in this case, can only be understood through fragments that need to be "pieced together" (166). The

resulting “restoration” (166) is, therefore, always “susceptible to misconstruction” (174) as well as tailoring and appropriation, thus pointing to “the impossibility of recovering an entirely authentic past” (188). However disintegrated, the traces of the past infiltrate and influence the present, as the motif of inheritance suggests, calling for “an examination and understanding of the past” as a vehicle for fully comprehending the complexities of the present (199).

With these observations, Cox’s extensive exploration of neo-sensation fiction finds a place within neo-Victorian scholarship, complementing and elucidating existing reflections on the relationship between past and present, and the characteristic traits of each period. There is, however, one important parameter that differentiates the project undertaken here from any previous attempts to discuss the neo-Victorian legacies of Victorian sensation fiction. Cox takes issue with the recurring assumption that neo-Victorianism’s agenda can only be promoted by literary fiction that shows awareness of the past. She also challenges/counters neo-Victorian criticism’s neglect of sensation fiction’s impact on popular culture by choosing among her primary sources texts and subgenres that bear the defamation of popular fiction. YA fiction, for example Philip Pullman’s *The Ruby in the Smoke* (1985) and Mary Hooper’s *Fallen Grace* (2010), as well as and popular historical novels like Elizabeth Peters’s *Crocodile on the Sandbank* (1975) which utilize the archaeological trope are three such cases in point. Disentangling sensation fiction from the obscurity to which the selective appreciation of its legacy had hitherto engulfed it, Cox felicitously restores popular fiction’s “critical value” (174, 8). In this way, by negotiating (neo-)sensation genres, tropes, and motifs, she addresses broader questions pertaining both to the Victorian genre and its contemporary renditions, namely “notions of literary hierarchy, . . . the role of popular fiction within critical debates, and . . . the emergence and development of neo-Victorian critical thought” (3). The author achieves, thus, to offer conscientious neo-Victorian criticism that actually practices what its subject matter preaches: as neo-Victorian fiction is concerned with

offering a voice to those individuals that were sidelined in the Victorian era, Cox's study succeeds in giving scholarly attention to texts and genres that were previously ignored in critical discourses. Sealing its argument on the enduring and pervasive influence of sensation fiction, the book paves the way for the expansion of "the neo-Victorian canon" (8), offering us a substantial first glimpse into the fascinating discoveries that such an attempt can bring to the fore.

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